DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 200 496 SO 013 261

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TITLE American Public Opinion Toward Sex Education and Contraception for Teenagers.
PUB DATE 1 Apr 81
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at Annual Meeting of the American Orthopsychiatric Association (58th, New York, NY, March 28-April 1, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adolescents; Attitude Change; Attitudes; *Contraception; Educational Needs; Educational Objectives; *Educational Policy; Policy Formation; Public Health; *Public Opinion; Secondary Education; *Sex Education; Social Problems; Surveys; *Trend Analysis

ABSTRACT

A study was undertaken to determine American attitudes toward sex education and contraceptive services to adolescents and toward the related topics of teenage pregnancy and related welfare and medical costs. The study was based on the premise that policy decisions regarding whether to offer sex education and contraceptive services to adolescents are influenced by policy makers' conceptions of public opinion. The method used was to integrate all available data on American public opinion toward sex education and birth control for teenagers and to relate findings from an analysis of the resulting data compilation to educational and public health policy at different time periods from 1943 to 1980. Data consisted of previous research studies in the fields of social science, medicine, and public health and of surveys by the American Institute of Public Opinion (the Gallup Organization). Several difficulties were encountered in interpreting data from different sources and time periods, including that questions asked at one time were neither parallel nor similar to questions asked at another period. In spite of the difficulties, however, findings indicated several clear trends. Most important among these findings are that a solid majority of the public has always been in favor of sex education for teenagers; that, recently, the public is overwhelmingly in favor of providing birth control information as part of this education; and that there has been a generally upward trend in approval of providing birth control for teenagers. The conclusion is that current policy concerning sex education and adolescent birth control is much more conservative than public opinion and that provision of more and better contraceptive services and sex education to teenagers would be supported by the American public. (DB)

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Presented 1 April 1981 at the Fifty-Eight Annual
Meeting of the American Orthopsychiatric Association
New York City, March 28-April 1, 1981

SP013261

AMERICAN PUBLIC OPINION TOWARD SEX EDUCATION AND CONTRACEPTION FOR TEENAGERS

Paul A. Reichelt, Ph.D.

A major challenge currently confronting American society and its policymakers concerns the fact that the majority of teenagers aged 15-19 are coitally experienced (Zelnik & Kantner, 1980). This pervasive sexual activity has a major impact on society because it results in approximately one and a third million (primarily nonmarital) teen conceptions a year (Tietze, 1978). And pregnancy and childbirth among teenagers has adverse health, psychosocial, and economic consequences for both the adolescent parents and their children.

These negative consequences have been brought to the attention of government officials, and in fact, are succinctly summarized in the adolescent pregnancy act, Public Law 95-626 "Health Services and Centers Amendments of 1978." It has also been estimated that the 600,000 births annually to teenagers cost the American taxpayer about $8.3 billion a year in welfare and medical costs (Ooms & Maciocha, 1979). And yet, the primary emphasis of PL 95-626 as it was finally enacted by Congress is on adolescents who are already pregnant or are parents. So recent government policy concerned with the problem of teenage pregnancy is conservative in the sense of being reactive rather than preventive. It appears that public policy may be influenced by the conventional wisdom of a general conservative shift among the American public.

Policymakers, especially those who are elected officials, concerned with the issue of unintended pregnancy among single teenagers no doubt feel that they must consider two aspects of the problem. One is viewed as being a pragmatic aspect--that of seeking to reduce unwanted pregnancy among teens by making birth control information and services available to them. The other aspect concerns norms about teenage sexual activity. This is sometimes viewed

as a public policy dilemma that arrays pragmatic concerns against normative ones.

What is often overlooked is that actually both aspects of the issue concern values. The frequently overlooked value issue relates to allowing young people to access services required for them to take full responsibility for their lifestyle, which is not necessarily the same as accepting the values represented by adolescent sexual behavior. This perspective provides a frame of reference for viewing the trend of American public opinion toward providing sex education and birth control services to teenagers.

Method

In order to determine the trend of public opinion on any topic, it is desirable that the data obtained at different points in time be as comparable as possible. The reliability of public opinion data may be affected by differences in sampling, the interview situation, and how the questions are worded. These differences can be minimized by only using data collected by one survey organization, provided that this does not result in excluding a significant amount of data on the topic.

For the topics of sex education and contraception for teenagers, it is reasonable to utilize data from a single survey organization because the American Institute of Public Opinion (The Gallup Organization) has collected most of the available national public opinion data on these topics. The Gallup Poll uses personal interviews and samples the adult (18 years and older), civilian, noninstitutional population. When compared to Census data, these Gallup samples of approximately 1,500 cases have generally been found to be representative of age, sex, race, and geographic area groupings. The 95% sampling tolerance for these samples is within 3% in either direction.

Even with the approach taken here of using data collected by a single survey organization, aspects of data noncomparability still exist. These

relate primarily to the specific question wording used by various investigators. These differences will be discussed as the data are presented.

Results

Sex Education

The topic of sex education has been an object of public opinion polling longer than the topic of birth control for teenagers. It was back in May 1943 that the issue was first raised (Gallup, 1972, p. 387). The question was phrased as follows: "It has been suggested that a course in sex education be given to students in high schools. Do you approve or disapprove of this plan?" It is a surprise to many people today that 68% of the public voiced approval for this suggestion at that time (see Figure 1). There is some indication that opinion was somewhat unstable back then as 16% had no opinion on the subject. In more recent times, the no opinion category for similar items has generally been less then 1%.

Insert Figure 1 about here

A second unique feature of these 1943 results is that they date back to the time when quota sampling was used rather than modern area probability sampling. The quota samples appear to have been quite good but there is a known bias due to a tendency to underrepresent the lower educational, income, and occupational levels. This could have the effect of inflating the approval response by underrepresenting those sociodemographic groups who, at least in more recent times, tend to demonstrate lower approval of sex education.

Starting in April 1965, Gallup began using a two-part question concerning sex education that was repeated in 1969, 1970, and most recently in December 1977. This format first asks, "Do you approve or disapprove of schools giving courses

in sex education?" which is similar to the 1943 format except that the reference is no longer specifically to high schools. Those respondents who voice approval are then asked, "would you approve or disapprove if these courses discussed birth control?" For clarity, the results of this second half of the two-part question are also reported as a percentage of the total population.

When this question was first asked in 1965, 69% approved of sex education in general in the schools but the degree of approval dropped significantly to 46% if birth control was specifically to be discussed (Gallup, 1972, p. 1940). This pattern of a drop from the general to the specific has been consistently found each time the questions have been asked. The corresponding percentages of approval for the other years are 71% and 55% in 1969, 65% and 36% in 1970, and 77% and 69% in 1977 (Gallup, 1978a; 1979, pp. 37-40).

An additional related question was commissioned by Planned Parenthood-World Population and fielded by The Gallup Organization in June 1972 (Pomeroy & Landman, 1972). This question asked, "To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement--Professional birth control information, services and counseling should be made available to unmarried teenagers who are sexually active." This question is obviously quite different in that it includes both education and services and refers specifically to sexually active, unmarried teenagers. The total agree response (agree plus strongly agree) to this question was 73%.

In their discussion of the response to this item, Pomeroy and Landman tend to emphasize that three-quarters of the public is indicating its approval of providing birth control services to teenagers. For several reasons, this is probably an overstatement. The wording of the item is slanted more toward the education domain (information and counseling) than toward birth control. The services aspect certainly does not stand out between information and counseling the way it would as a separate item, and in fact, it is possible that some

respondents may have taken the word "services" to mean educationally oriented services rather than the actual provision of contraception as the investigators intended. A second point is that the multidimensional format of the item may have, in effect, induced respondents to approve services if they did not want to disapprove information and counseling. And finally, the level of approval for this item fits the trend of public opinion toward sex education for teenagers but, as will be demonstrated, it is definitely above the trend of approval for birth control services for teenagers.

Two aspects of the entire data series concerned with sex/birth control education for teenagers should be noted. First is the fact that by December 1977, the differential between approval of sex education and approval of birth control instruction has been narrowed to 8%. Second, the trend of increasing approval since 1943 is broken by the drop in approval in 1970. This drop is most dramatic for approval of birth control instruction.

Keeping in mind the logical fallacy represented by the phrase "post hoc, ergo propter hoc" (after this, therefore because of this), one possible explanation for this drop in approval will be cautiously advanced. The beginning of 1970 marked the start of well-publicized Congressional hearings on birth control pills. These hearings corresponded with a major drop in the public's confidence in the safety of the pill (Blake, 1977) and because most teenage women who utilize professional birth control services use the pill, this may also have influenced the public to be less approving of providing information about the pill and other sex education topics to teenagers.

Blake (1973) had an item on birth control education fielded during 1969-1972. However, data are only reported for white Americans and so the results will not be discussed here because they do not extend the time series in either direction. The second series of items to be considered consists of questions specifically focused on the provision of contraceptive services to teenagers.

Contraception

Due to the paucity of items on this topic, a question used by Blake (1973) during 1969-1972 will be discussed. The fact that the data refer only to whites raises the issue of comparability with other data based upon samples representative of the entire American public. While this is certainly a concern, it is not considered to be a major problem for this topic. Pomeroy and Landman (1972) note that their findings and those of other surveys do not suggest that U.S. blacks support services to teenagers much less than do whites. And the black subsample of a representative national sample is sufficiently small so that unless the black/white response difference is particularly sharp, the results for whites will be a reasonable picture of the total sample results.

The question, "What about health programs that gave birth control free to teenage girls who requested it? Would you approve or disapprove?" was first asked in January 1969 and repeated in October 1969, July 1970, and August 1972. Figure 2 shows that the rate of approval for these four dates is 38%, 39%, 40%, and 54% respectively (Blake, 1973).

Insert Figure 2 about here

A different question asked in February 1970 gave very different results. When asked, "Do you favor or oppose making birth control pills available to teenage girls?", only 15% of the public voiced approval (Gallup, 1972, p. 2239). Unlike the first question that referred to birth control in general, this question directly asks about providing teenage girls with birth control pills. The question therefore requires the respondent to consider issues connected with providing pills to young women.

Previously it was noted that there was a major drop in the public's confidence in the safety of the pill in early 1970. Over time, confidence in the pill's safety started back up. This may explain the early 1970 decrease

in approval of contraception for teenagers which subsequently recovered to the earlier level of approval.

The fact that raising the issue of the pill's safety tends to decrease approval of pill use is the reason that an overlapping time series on making pills available to teenage girls (Blake, 1977) is not being considered in the present discussion. That question followed, and was thus affected by, a previous interview question where the respondent was asked if he or she thought the pill was dangerous to use.

The last and most recent data point to be considered results from interviews conducted in December 1977. When asked, "Do you favor or oppose making birth control devices available to teenage boys and girls?", 56% of the respondents replied that they favored this course of action (Gallup, 1979, pp. 37-40). Thus, public approval of contraceptive services for teenagers rose from 38% to 56% during the period January 1969 to December 1977.

Discussion

An analysis of the trend in public opinion toward sex education and birth control for adolescents makes several conclusions apparent. A solid majority of the public have always been in favor of sex education for teenagers and most recently they are almost as approving of specifically providing birth control information as a part of the sex education. Consistent with this is the generally upward trend in approval of providing birth control for teenagers. Since 1972 a majority of Americans have approved of such contraceptive services.

A number of things have been occurring that help explain these increases in favorable public opinion. First of all, the subject of teenage sexuality has been brought and kept before the public by the mass media. This increased its salience as a social issue for many people and its acceptance as a subject for discussion may have encouraged a more liberal attitude. Becoming aware of

the epidemic of nonmarital teenage pregnancy and its adverse consequences may have led people to conclude that providing sex education and birth control is preferable to high rates of teenage abortion and childbearing.

Also bringing the issue before the public have been the actions in both word and deed (such as establishing programs for teens) of persons in all branches of government and of reputable private citizens on government commissions. Such individuals often serve as opinion leaders and thus increase public support for issues they champion. And third, there has been recent recognition by the courts of the rights of minors, including access to fertility control services on their own consent. As services became more available and familiar to the public, more people have become convinced that such services are worthy of support.

While the increase in public approval of sex education and contraceptive services for adolescents is understandable, it runs counter to the conventional wisdom of a general conservative shift among the American public. The reason for this is that the conventional wisdom is not firmly supported by the available data on American opinion and values. Among other data sources, the General Social Surveys conducted by the National Opinion Research Center demonstrate that there are diverse trends in U.S. opinion. While some of these trends can reasonably be described as conservative (e.g., the modest growth of support for strong measures for handling criminals), other trends (e.g., the constant support for abortion) definitely cannot be, and the overall movement in attitudes decisively contradicts the idea of a simple conservative swing (Ladd, 1980).

Nonetheless, current policy concerning sex education and adolescent birth control services is not in tune with the current level of public support. For example, only 30 states have a policy statement expressly addressing sex education in the schools and these policies do not demonstrate strong commitment to such instruction (Kenney & Alexander, 1980). This may be because policymakers

are unduly influenced by a vocal minority (who may at times erroneously label themselves a majority). Gun control provides another example of this phenomenon. For as long as modern opinion polling has been conducted, never have fewer than two-thirds of the U.S. public wanted some kind of gun control (Erskine, 1972). And yet, gun control legislation is routinely defeated.

The gap between public opinion and policy is readily apparent when one looks at current levels of adolescent services. Most students do not receive sex education (Gallup, 1978b), even though such programs effectively transmit knowledge (Reichelt & Werley, 1976). And over half the teenage population at risk of unintended pregnancy is not receiving contraceptive services (Dryfoos & Heisler, 1979), although such services do not cause teens to initiate coitus (Reichelt, 1979) or to substantially alter their patterns of sexual activity (Reichelt, 1978).

The current pattern of early age at initiation of intercourse and associated nonuse of birth control means that half of initial premarital teen pregnancies occur in the first six months of sexual activity (Zabin, Kantner, & Zelnik, 1979). Therefore, programs to prevent unintended adolescent pregnancies must reach young people of both sexes before they begin sexual activity with information on human sexuality and places where contraception may be obtained. Young people must be reached at an early age because young adolescents are the least likely to use birth control and so are at greatest risk of conceiving shortly after initiating intercourse (Zabin et al., 1979).

Jaffe and Dryfoos (1976) present data from a variety of sources to support the thesis that accessibility is the most important determinant of birth control use by teens. And program activity variables such as the number of agencies and clinic locations providing services are particularly sensitive to policy change. Most adolescents would avoid pregnancy and parenthood if they could. The availability of fertility control services is not

related to a greater likelihood of premarital sex but it is related to a lower incidence of conception (Moore & Caldwell, 1977). So provision of more and better contraceptive services and sex education to teenagers should be an important policy goal that would be supported by the American people according to the public opinion data previously presented.

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Figure 1. Percentage of the American public approving sex education and birth control information for teenagers, 1943-1977.

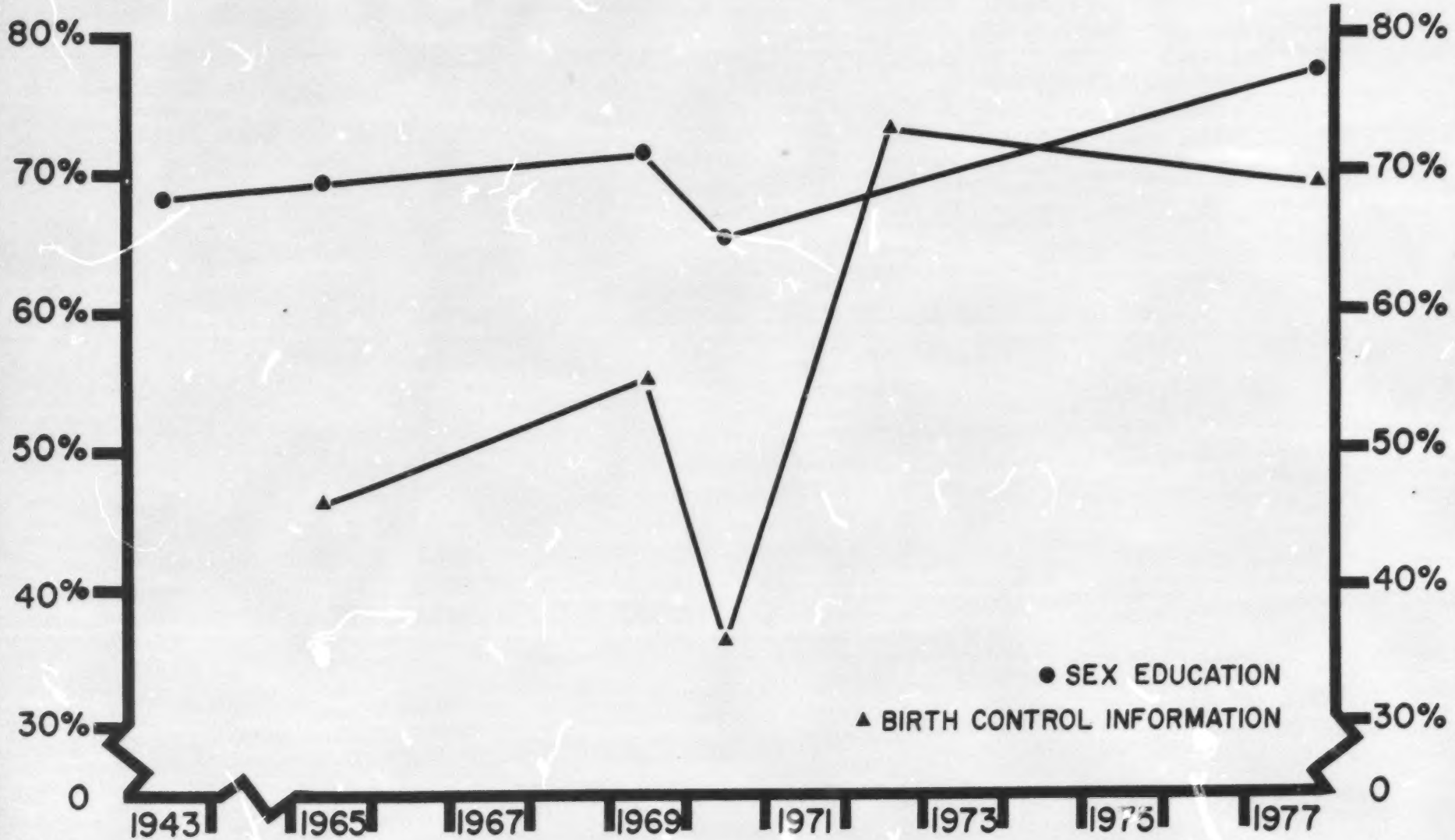

Figure 2. Percentage of the American public approving birth control for teenagers, 1969-1977.